

THE LAST WILL AND TESTAMENT OF A FIFTEENTH-CENTURY PEMBROKESHIRE ESQUIRE: HENRY PERROT OF GAWR-Y-COED

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By Roger Turvey

The Perrots were a Pembrokeshire phenomenon and represent the classic tale of a family's rise from obscurity to dominance in the space of two centuries. By the middle of the fifteenth century they were securely established in the ranks of the county's powerful elite. They were among the county's largest landowners with estates scattered throughout the earldom and its constituent lordships. The family's success was due to the hard work of talented individuals who ensured that each generation contributed something to enhancing their social, political and economic power. The will transcribed and printed here for the first time may represent one of the more obscure members of the Perrot family but this does not make him any less important or significant than his more illustrious familial colleagues. The publication of this document will, for a brief moment, release Henry Perrot from the shadow of his undeserved oblivion.

Apart from its intrinsic value and relative rarity this will is significant also for what it is as opposed to simply what it says. This will is of particular interest and value for it is the rarest of testamentary evidence in that it is an original rather than a registered copy. The vast majority of wills consulted almost on a daily basis somewhere in the United Kingdom by family historians or genealogical researchers, are copies submitted by the families of testators to the appropriate ecclesiastical court. The courts with the power to prove and grant probate on submission of the will and testament were those presided over by officers acting in the name of the archdeacon, bishop or archbishop. The destination of these testamentary submissions depended upon the wealth and status of the testator, especially those who held property in more than one diocese. Where the deceased had goods worth more than £5 per annum the local archdeaconry court was the likely destination but more substantial landowners might have their wills proved in the bishop's court. However, partly out of pride and prestige and partly for reasons of the officers' professionalism and efficiency, the gentry or uchelwyr of Pembrokeshire preferred to use the provincial court of the archbishop of Canterbury. Henry's will is unique because it is the earliest extant record of its kind pertaining to the Perrots of Pembrokeshire and was proved in the court of the archdeaconry of Pebidiog.¹ In addition, it is one of only four original wills to have survived among the muniments of the Perrot family, the remainder are copies registered in the records of the prerogative court of Canterbury.²

The Testator

To modern historians Henry Perrot is an enigma, a person who certainly existed but whose existence is elusive due mainly to a lack of documentary evidence. If historians are hampered by the failure of contemporary scribes to record details of Henry they are no better served by poets and genealogists who make no mention of the man. Even that most prolific of genealogists, the Welsh herald Lewys Dwnn, was silent on this particular Perrot though he was quite effusive in his treatment of the remaining members of the family. The first historian to chronicle the history of the Perrots, the reverend E.L. Barnwell, fared no better. Writing in the second half of the nineteenth century Barnwell was aware of Henry's existence but he could not place him with confidence in the Perrot family tree.³ Thus, Henry is said to have been the son of Stephen Perrot, by his second wife Margaret Stepney, and the half-brother of Sir Thomas. The fact that this second marriage is a fiction calls into question the accuracy of the family tree drawn up by Barnwell. Indeed, the fitful references to Henry in Barnwell's Perrot Notes underlines the author's unease in dealing with an individual whose existence he could neither prove nor disprove. Although better informed than Barnwell even that great chronicler of Pembrokeshire's history,

Henry Owen, did not know who Henry was, which is perhaps why he made only a passing reference to the man in his seminal study of the county's most prominent families.⁴ To Owen 'Henry Perrot of Caervoriog' was worthy of note simply because his lands had become subject to dispute and legal proceedings in 1502.⁵ Although more evidence has come to light on Henry, most notably his last will and testament, he remains a shadowy character but we have enough information to at least sketch a pen-portrait of the man.

Who was Henry Perrot? Far from being the younger brother of Sir Thomas Perrot, as Barnwell believed, Henry was, in fact, his youngest son by his second wife Joan, the widow of Lewis (or Llywelyn) Warren of Trewern in Cemais. Henry's father was a member of the county's powerful elite being one of a small cabal of ministers on whose shoulders fell the burden of governing the shire on behalf of their lord, Jasper Tudor, earl of Pembroke. It was an unstable period in English politics with the dynastic rivalry between the houses of York and Lancaster threatening to plunge the kingdom into civil war. When war did break out in 1455, labelled by some historians as the Wars of the Roses, the Perrots allied themselves to the Lancastrians but with catastrophic results for in April 1461 Henry's father, Sir Thomas, became one of its earliest casualties. He died in Bristol of wounds received two months before at the battle of Mortimer's Cross and was succeeded as head of the family by Thomas, his eldest son from his first marriage to Alice Picton.

Sir Thomas left no less than eleven children, four boys and seven girls, of whom Henry appears to have been among the youngest. In a remarkable marriage policy to rival that of any would-be potentate, Henry's sisters were wedded to men belonging to some of the most powerful families in Pembrokeshire – Elliot, Newton, Warren, Wogan and Wyrriot. Nor did this mix of marriage and politics end at the borders of Pembrokeshire for in casting his net wider Sir Thomas succeeded in attracting a suitor for his daughter Margaret, who was arguably among the most powerful men in south Wales. The ambitious and aggressive Gruffudd ap Nicholas, of Dinefwr in Carmarthenshire, was a man to be reckoned with and though a Lancastrian like his Perrot father-in-law, self interest tended to dominate this Welshman's agenda. Sir Thomas did not neglect to see to the needs of his sons for whom suitable brides were found from within the county, for example, the eldest, Thomas, was married to Jane, the daughter of John Wyse, whilst Henry was betrothed to Isabel, the daughter of Thomas Laugharne of St. Brides.

Primogeniture ensured that Henry and his brothers, Stephen and John, were unlikely to inherit a fortune and so had to make their own way in the world. That said, it does seem that their father had made some provision for them for it is evident that during the latter half of the fifteenth century Henry and his brothers were comfortably settled on the family's outlying estates. It is possible that in an effort to provide for his sons, Sir Thomas may have invested them with a modest property of their own, whilst entrusting each of them with the management of a family estate. Thus, whilst John could be found managing the Perrot manor of Woodstock in the lordship of Wiston, he was given possession of property in the lordship of Llansteffan. Similarly, Stephen appears to have been settled in Canaston in the lordship of Narberth whilst his half brother, Henry, was packed off north to Pebidiog or Dewsland, the lordship of the bishop of St. David's. It is here, in the late 1450s, that Henry first enters the historical record transacting business with his employer, the bishop of St. David's, John de la Bere.⁶ The bishop agreed to renounce his rights to lands held by Henry Perrot who is described as the former constable of Pebidiog and keeper of the forests of Llwydarth and Grasswood.

Clearly Henry was a man of means and of some consequence in the local administration. As constable of Pebidiog Henry wielded much power being responsible for the judicial administration of the lordship that included the holding of courts, the detention of felons, the collection of fines and in general maintaining the peace. According to custom the constable could deduct a fee of 5s. from the goods of convicted felons.⁷ If the constablenesship enhanced his power and local standing, the keepership of the forests, located in the lordship of Llawhaden, generated wealth. This was a lucrative position, which enabled Henry to collect, and no doubt exploit, the revenues due to the bishop. Llawhaden was the administrative centre of the bishop's Pembrokeshire landholdings and within the walls of its castle could be found the exchequer, chancery and his principal court of justice.⁸ Thus Henry Perrot must have been a frequent visitor to the borough

and castle of Llawhaden which must have assisted his role as overseer of the lordship's extensive forests which lay to the north-east of the town near Maenclochog.⁹

How long he had held these offices is not known but the fact that he served a cleric, John de la Bere, who was an absentee, suggests that Henry may have had the freedom to exercise his office as he saw fit. Bishop Bere appears to have taken a relaxed view of his episcopal responsibilities and it is said that he rarely, if ever, visited his Pembrokeshire estates, let alone set foot in the cathedral. Indeed, in the opinion of Sir Glanmor Williams, Bishop Bere was 'perhaps the worst, and certainly the most notorious' of the bishops who held the diocese during the fifteenth century.¹⁰ Described by critical contemporaries as someone who was 'very worldly and carnal', Bere was regarded as a self-seeking man of 'no good character'.¹¹ In addition to Bere's obvious flaws it may have been to Henry's advantage that the bishop had committed the care of his episcopal estates to Gruffudd ap Nicholas sometime after his appointment to the see in 1447.¹² It is possible that Henry's appointment to office may have coincided with his brother-in-law's running of the bishop's administration.

In view of his family connections and administrative responsibilities it is perhaps surprising to find that Henry's landholdings and property interests were relatively modest. The centre of his landholdings, and the place he called home, was the small manor of Gwar-y-Coed near Solva but his property interests ranged further afield. He owned land at nearby Hendregreffudd and managed Perrot property at Whitchurch and Caerforiog. Henry was a man in whom people placed a great deal of trust for in 1469 Philip Lloydyn issued a letter of attorney appointing him, as the chief tenant, to hold the manorial courts of Whitchurch and Gwar-y-Coed.¹³ Presiding over the manorial courts and accounting for rents, and fines, must have done much to enhance Henry's status and reputation.

Henry's interests were not confined to rural estates for it is clear he owned property in the episcopal borough of St. David's in which he later became a burgess. Henry's burghal and mercantile interests extended as far as Haverfordwest for in the summer of 1464 he was busy conveying a burgage in High Street together with three and a half burgages and gardens in Goat's Street, to John Waryn and his wife Gwenllian.¹⁴ Waryn, a wealthy tailor in the town, was to hold the properties for life, paying his Perrot landlord an annual rent of 18s. That Henry and his wife Isabella effected this transaction to Waryn jointly suggests that the properties may have come into Perrot's possession through marriage. The Laugharnes were merchants of some consequence in the town and for much of the fifteenth century they were active in the property market. Waryn was clearly a successful businessman for he was able later to purchase property in Llawhaden and take up the life of a country gentleman. He and Henry would later transact business in the lordship of Pebidiog since there is evidence to suggest that Waryn had acquired an interest in Caerforiog and its environs. However, as events were later to prove, it was a transaction that was to sour relations between Waryn and Henry's heir, his nephew, Sir William Perrot.

Henry's interests in Haverfordwest notwithstanding, his primary focus remained those estates he owned and those he managed on behalf of his family in the bishop's lordship of Pebidiog. Caerforiog was a substantial manor and it is here that he first settled when he came north to manage the Perrot estates.¹⁵ This explains why he is sometimes referred to as being 'of Caervoriog' but once he acquired Gwar-y-Coed in his own right he moved and settled there. Gwar-y-Coed still exists but the original manor house is no more and has been replaced by a modern, possibly Victorian, farmhouse. It was here, at Gwar-y-Coed, that Henry made his will before his death in the spring of 1491. Henry's date of birth is not known but he was dead by 12 April 1491 when his will was proved in the local ecclesiastical court.¹⁶ It is evident that he and Isabella were not blessed with children, which explains why he willed that his wife would enjoy his estates during her lifetime but that upon her death they were to pass to his nephew Sir William Perrot of Haroldston. Isabella outlived her husband by some eleven years and was almost certainly dead by the summer of 1502.¹⁷ A few years before her death, in March 1498, she returned those properties her husband had been entrusted to manage on behalf of his family.¹⁸ Although Henry had only a life interest in Caerforiog his widow was allowed to continue to hold the estate for some seven years before agreeing to convey it to her husband's nephew.

The last we hear of 'Harry Perrotte ... late of Caerveriocke Esquyer' is as an incidental reference in a legal dispute between Sir William Perrot and John Waryn of 'Lauhaden Gentilman'.¹⁹ The two were in bitter conflict about property and rents in and around Caerforiog which had been granted to Waryn by Henry but which Sir William was seeking to recover. The property and sums involved were not huge, some ten acres with rents attached, amounting to 52s. 10d., but it was sufficient to warrant a commission to settle the matter. Unfortunately, the original petition is missing and all that remains is the findings of the arbitrators, headed by Richard Raithor, doctor of law, and assisted by two local esquires, Trahearn ap Morgan and John Walter. The document was drawn up on 19 July, after which it was witnessed and sealed at Haroldston a few days later and the disputed properties and rents were returned to the Perrots.

The Will and Testament

The Testamentum of Henricius Perrot, Armigeri, is a remarkable document not only for what it includes but also for what it omits. It deals almost exclusively with the conveyance of Henry's entire landed possessions to his nephew Sir William, which was to be effected only after the death of his widow, Isabella. The fact that the properties are not defined and listed suggests that they had already been disposed of and this was simply a confirmation of that earlier conveyance. Of greater interest is the absence of the usual bequests, usually in money, to places of worship such as local churches and monasteries. Unusually, especially given its proximity, there is no mention of the cathedral church of St. David's. Again, this might indicate an earlier disposition though a lack of disposable income cannot be entirely ruled out. Equally, the time between the writing of the will and the grant of probate, some eleven days, suggests that Henry may have become suddenly or unexpectedly ill which might have caused the document to be written in a hurry. Apart from the disposal of properties the key feature of the will is the attention to detail regarding Henry's funeral arrangements. He wished to be buried beneath the arch of the north chancel of his local parish church, Whitchurch, before the image of Saint Christopher the Martyr. His funeral cortege was to include a procession of torch bearers, probably selected from among the parish poor, for which service they were to receive a pipe of ale together with bread and cheese.

Equally significant is the reference in the will to certain individuals both friends and officials. The reference to Nicholas David presiding over the archdeaconry court is worthy of note because apart from St. David's no other diocese in Wales had one. Also of interest is the light the will sheds on the identity and social class, Henry's close circle of friends and neighbours. Two gentlemen, Thomas Butler and John Richard, and two husbandmen, John Adam and Thomas Vanger, are mentioned. The last named were of that class of hard-working farmers who either owned or rented their, usually modest, farms. Butler, on the other hand, was a younger son of the Butlers of Coedcenlas and his residence, Trecadwgan, lay just across the river Solva from Gwar-y-Coed. Richard is rather more elusive but he may have been a fellow burgess of Henry's in St. David's. The priest who conducted the burial was Maurice David, 'vicario perpetuo de Whitechurch', who may have been related to the archdeacon of Pebidiog but who was doubtless well known to his near neighbour and faithful parishioner from Gwar-y-Coed. It is possible that Maurice David, acting in his capacity as scribe and spiritual adviser, was responsible for drawing up the will on behalf of Henry.

Henry Perrot's death in April 1491 brought an end to the career of a man whom history has largely forgotten but who deserves to have a light shone on his meaningful life. In spite of the detailed description of his last resting place within the walls of his local parish church at Whitchurch, there is no discernible monument to mark his grave, though it is certain that he lies buried beneath the floor of the chancel arch.²⁰ Our knowledge of him rests on the chance survival of six documents found among the near 1300 that make up the Perrot family archive. By far the most important of them is the will which remains as a testament as much to his faith as to his life.



St David's church, Whitchurch.

Henry Perrot is buried beneath the arch of the north chance. The north chancel, seen here at right angles to the nave and main entrance, was added possibly sometime in the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century.

Appendix: The Will and Testament of Henry Perrot, esquire

Testamentum Henricius Perrot, Armigeri

IN DEI NOMINE AMEN. Ego Henricius Perrot compos mente ac sane memorie eger tamen in corpore kalende die Aprilis Anno Domini Millesimo CCCCLXXXI condo testamentum meum in hunc modum.

In primis lego animam meam Deo patri omnipotenti beate Marie Virgini et omnibus sanctis eius corpusque meum sepeliendum in alba ecclesia videlicet mea parochialia ecclesia in cancella boriali eisdem coram ymagine beate Cristoferi Martiris.

Item do et lego pauperibus venientibus die sepulture mee ibidem ad orandum pro anima mea unam pipam cervisie cum pane et caseo. Item sex torchias et sex taperas circa [uncertain reading] meum.

Item do et lego Isabelle uxori mee legitime omnia messuagia terras tenementa dominia redditus et servicia mea cum suis pertinentiis infra dominium de Pebid[iak] habenda et tenenda omnia predicta messuagia terras tenementa dominia redditus et servicia cum suis pertinentiis cum seniorietate mea de Whytechurche et Gwarycoyde prefate Isabelle ad terminum vite sue absque impetitione aliqua vasti.

Item do et concedo omnia mesuagia terras et tenementa mea cum pertinentiis infra burgum et in campis Menevie dicte Isabelle uxoris mee ad terminum vite sue absque impetitione aliqua vasti. Post vero decessum dicte Isabelle uxoris mee volo quod Willielmus Perott de Haroldiston et sui heredes habeant omnia mesuagia terras et tenementa mea cum pertinentiis infra burgum et in campis Menevie dicte Isabelle uxoris mee ad terminum vite sue absque impetitione aliqua vasti. Post vero decessum dicte Isabelle uxoris mee volo quod Willielmus Perott de Haroldiston et sui heredes habeant omnia mesuagia terras et tenementa redditus et servicia cum pertinentiis universes infra dominium de Pebid[iak] ac etiam seniorietatem meam de Whitechurche et

Gwarycoyde predicta imperpetuum de capite domino feodi per redditus et servicia inde debite et de iure consueta.

Item de et lego omnia catalla mea tam mobilia quam immobilia dicte Isabelle uxoris mee ut ipsa disponat prout ei visum fuerit pro salute anime mee ac eandam Isabellam uxorem meam legitimam facio ordino et consituo in meam executorem.

In cuius rei testimonium huic presenti testamento meo sigillum meum opposi.

Hiis testibus presentibus Mauricio David' vicario perpetuo de Whitechurch' et Thoma Butler gentilman Johanne Richard gentilman John Adam et Thoma Vanger husbandmen cum multis aliis.

Item do et lego Willielmo Perott de Haroldiston' et heredibus suis post decessum Isabelle uxoris mee omnia messuagia terras et tenementa mea cum pertinentiis universes infra burgum et in campis Menevie imperpetuum de capite domino feodi per redditus et servicia inde debite et de iure consueta.

Probatum fuit istud testamentum coram nobis Nicholao David' Decanao ac commiss' decanatus de Pebid' et administratione bonorum defuncti per nos concessa executori infrascripte. In cuius rei testimonium sigillum suo ultimur in nostro officio presentibus apposuimus. Datum xii die mensis Aprilis Anno Domini Millesimo CCCCLXXXI.

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Notes

1. National Archives, E.210/5025.
2. The Perrot wills still extant are those drawn up for Henry (1491), Sir William (1503), Jane (1504), Thomas (1531), Sir John (1584 and 1592), Sir Thomas (1594), Sir James (1637) and Sir Herbert (1683).
3. E.L. Barnwell, Perrot Notes (London, 1967), 29, 75-6, 132.
4. Henry Owen, Old Pembroke Families (London, 1902), 51-61.
5. Ibid., 55.
6. NA, E. 326/13560.
7. J.W. Willis Bund (ed.), The Black Book of St. David's (London, 1902), lxvii.
8. J.C. Davies, 'The Black Book of St. David's', National Library of Wales Journal, IV (1946), 163; Willis Bund, Black Book of St. David's, xvii.
9. The forest of Llwydarth covered some 300 acres in the fourteenth century but by the late sixteenth century it had all but disappeared. Willis Bund, Black Book of St. David's, 167; Dillwyn Miles (ed.), The Description of Pembrokeshire by George Owen of Henllys (Llandysul, 1994), 89-90.
10. Glanmor Williams, The Welsh Church From Conquest to Reformation (rev. edn., Cardiff, 1976), 307. John de la Bere served as bishop of St. David's for thirteen years between 1447 and 1460.
11. Ibid., 308; F. Green (ed.), Menevia Sacra by Edward Yardley (London, 1927), 74.
12. Ralph Griffiths, Sir Rhys ap Thomas and his Family (Cardiff, 1993), 18.
13. NA, E.210/2665.
14. NA, E.210/2725.
15. There is a strong tradition that links Adam de Houghton with Caerforiog. Bishop Houghton, Lord Chancellor of England between 1377 and 1378, is said to have been born here. He served as bishop of St. David's for 28 years between 1361 and 1389.
16. NA, E.210/5025. See appendix for a transcription of the will.
17. The property dispute between Sir William Perrot and John Waryn, in July 1502, is likely to have arisen only after Isabella's death. NA, E.211/399.
18. NA, E.210/5018. The deed makes clear that possession of Caerforiog was only for the life of Henry. Although the deed suggests that it was made by his brother Thomas, it is likely that this was a confirmation of the original life grant made earlier by their father Sir Thomas.
19. The decision of the arbitrators has been printed in Barnwell, Perrot Notes, 157.
20. The step beneath the arch bears some markings which may indicate the partial remains of a medieval tomb but it is indistinct and would require further investigation.

